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Websites: What You Need to Know *Before You Start!* Early planning ideas

by [Sunny Carney](#), DBS Design*Part I of a two-part guide to establishing a presence on the web*

In today's world, most potential clients expect to be able to visit a website to learn about your company, see photos of your products, and check prices. The look of your website, the ease of navigating through it, and the quality of the content will either invite them in, or will have them "googling" for other vendors!

If you're thinking about a web presence for your business, this guide will help you prepare to make sensible decisions about what you need, where to start, and what it may cost. We'll start with information you need to begin and a brief overview of the process. Next time, we'll talk about getting started and what the designer will need from you. In the third article, we'll discuss some of the "bells and whistles" you might want, when to add them, and additional costs.

Start Small

Think about starting small, especially if you have a physical presence that potential clients can visit. Starting small lets you become familiar with the process, reduces initial costs, and keeps you and your staff from becoming overwhelmed with the preliminary preparations and decisions.

This is a cooperative effort between the client and the designer and/or developer. Here are a few things you need before taking the first step:

- **Have a clear vision of the purpose of the site.** This can include information about your company, your mission, a brief company history, information about your management team and/or satisfied clients, and, of course, the nature and scope of the products and services you provide. Approach this more or less as you would a multi-page ad or a brochure.
- **Decide what kind of first impression you want the site to project.** Should it be serious and sedate? Dignified and professional? Fun and "today"? Base this decision on what you already know about your target audience. Before a designer can develop sample designs, she'll need to know who you are and the image you want to convey.

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- **Determine whether you already have materials that can be used on the site.** Examples are a professionally designed logo, product and/or staff photos, location photos, graphics, and copy from brochures or press releases that can be reused.
- **Do you have physical locations that potential customers can visit?** If so, include a listing of your locations (preferably with photos and maybe even simple maps), hours of operation, phone numbers, etc.
- **Can potential clients contact you easily to get additional information or to schedule appointments?** Gather all your contact information for your "About Us" page or the "Locations" page.
- **"Guesstimate" the minimum number of pages that you'll need on the site to have a respectable start.** Remember, you can add more pages later. Rather than invest a huge amount for a larger than necessary website, start small and add as needed.

The Process, in a Nutshell

When you have a plan and your resources together, contact one or more designers and be prepared to provide information, including the initial number of pages, type of business, what materials you can provide, and the goal for the site. Most designers will offer to provide three to five separate designs "on spec" for you to choose from and may allow limited changes to the design before you have a contract.

When you've selected a design from the samples and discussed prices, terms, and options, the designer will submit a contract. With a contract, the designer will work with you to refine the basic design you selected. There may be limits imposed, to ensure that the project will actually be completed eventually!

Most designers require a non-refundable deposit/advance payment of one-fourth to one-third of the total contract amount, with additional payments to be made at agreed-upon milestones. The balance is due upon satisfactory completion of the project, and your website may not "go live" until final payment is received.

You will need to select a website hosting company. Designers can do this for you, or you can do it yourself, with input from your designer. If you prefer that the designer do it, the cost will be included in your contract, and may increase the up-front payment by the cost of a one-year hosting agreement (shorter terms are available, but are more expensive than annual agreements).

Before you contact a website hosting company, select several possible domain names (e.g., www.smithtractors.com). Your designer can explain this to you. The hosting company will check to see if your first choice is available; if it's not, they'll see if your second choice (smithtractors.com) is available. It's not a bad idea to have a list of four or five possible website names just in case!

One last word: don't limit yourself to only local designers. The one who may produce the best design for your budget and goals may be in the next city, a few states away, or even in a different country! Our current technology provides numerous ways to communicate effectively from anywhere: e-mail, instant messaging, web conferences (complete with white boards!), and software that provides a shared space, and the options are increasing every day.

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